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"Recent Communal Violence in Gujarat, India, and the U.S. Response": Felice Gaer Opening Remarks

JUNE 10, 2002

We

turn our attention this morning to India, and specifically to the recent communal violence and killings in the state of Gujarat. After the killing in the town of Godhra of 58 Hindu civilians on the Sabarmati Express (26 women, 12 children, 20 men) on February 27, 2002 by Muslims, retaliatory violence in Gujarat by Hindus against Muslims took place and has continued. It is estimated that at least 1,000 Muslims have died. Reports cite numerous persons shot, stabbed, raped, mutilated, and/or burned to death. In addition, hundreds of mosques and Muslim-owned businesses were looted or destroyed. More than 100,000 persons have fled their homes and now are in makeshift camps for internally displaced persons. There has also been counter-retaliatory violence against Hindus, of whom a reported 10,000 have been made homeless. What is more, the violence has yet to be fully contained.

The accounts of a thousand people being killed in clashes because of their religious identity is cause enough for this Commission to be concerned. In addition, however, we are also concerned about several recent reports which suggest that the government of Gujarat and some members of the police force may have been implicated in the violence in that state. These reports come from many sources, including India's own National Human Rights Commission. Evidence from these reports argues that the communal violence was carefully planned. According to the report of the NHRC, there have been "widespread reports and allegations of well-organized persons, armed with mobile telephones and addresses, singling out certain homes and properties for death and destruction in certain districts-sometimes within view of police stations and personnel." We are also aware of counter-charges, mainly by officials of the state of Gujarat, arguing that the major violent incidents were themselves provoked by acts directed against Hindu residents. We hope to gain insight into the facts, the arguments, the role of the government in bringing those responsible for the violent acts to justice, and the way forward.

The Commission has long been concerned about the situation for religious tolerance and respect for human rights of all persons in India. In its May 2001 report, the Commission noted expressed the need for India's government to do more to protect religious minorities and to bring persons responsible for violent incidents to account. The Commission further stated its serious concern about the association of increased violence against religious minorities and the rise in power of Hindu nationalist groups in India. Though that report did not

directly implicate the national government in carrying out previous attacks on Christian and Muslim minorities, the Commission did express concern that the central government is not doing all that it could to pursue and punish the perpetrators of the attacks and to counteract the climate of hostility, in some quarters in India, against these minority groups.

The Commission believes that it is important for the United States government, in its work with the Indian government, to help foster a climate of greater religious tolerance. The Commission is thus very concerned that the United States government has not spoken out forcefully against the attacks on Muslims in Gujarat. And we hope to look more closely into the US response and develop recommendations to our government on these matters, in accord with our own legislative mandate. I should add that we were heartened by the remarks of India's attorney general who on May 29, pointing out that human rights are not simply internal matters, told a UN panel on the protection of minorities that "Failure to punish those who harass or persecute the minorities ... subverts the rule of law which is the hallmark of every civilized society."

The recent events in Gujarat, the role of the state government and police authorities in those events, and the role of American diplomacy in India are just some of the topics we hope to learn more about today. In particular, we hope to examine a number of the recommendations to the Indian government outlined in the report of the National Commission on Human Rights and others to determine the ways that the United States, through its policy toward India, can play a role in helping to protect religious freedom for all there. We will have two panels this morning. The first panel includes witnesses who have recently been in Gujarat and who can describe events on the ground there-what happened and to whom, and with what result. The second panel will provide us with an analysis of the wider picture: what measures would be an effective response to the communal violence, what this means for the future of India, and what the United States can do in response. We also have with us other visitors from India who have agreed to be available to answer questions during the question and answer segment.

We hope very much to adhere to today's agenda. Thus, I ask each presenter to limit his/her testimony to 10 minutes in order for us to have plenty of time for questions from all of us.